

## Book Review

### *The Latino Education Crisis*

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Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras. *The Latino Education Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 432 pp. ISBN 067403127X. \$29.95.

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, researchers and policy analysts have consistently directed our attention to the putative crisis state of US education. The reasons for the crisis vary, but are often symptomatic of a nation-wide despair over political and economic affairs that extend to the international arena. Whether the United States has claimed victory in cold-war politics, prepared itself for the suspected demise of its pre-eminence in global capitalism, or protested the unbraiding of its moral and cultural fabric in the ongoing culture wars, both the causes and remedies for alleviating social ills through education have been enthusiastically—and at times, frantically—set forward.

Oftentimes policy précis and other research documents focus on the structural determinations of failed educational delivery: lackluster curricular offerings in the biological and physical sciences, poor teacher preparation, or loose college admission requirements that do not properly discriminate between the worthy and unworthy. Once the conditions have been identified that obfuscate, or trouble, high-quality teaching and learning, then the path towards reform and recovery are relatively easy to discern. Legislation becomes the centerpiece of reform, and a slew of policy initiatives and mandates will follow to ensure that teachers receive proper training or proper evaluation; that education curricula be scientifically valid and quantifiable; and that so-called minority or poor student populations receive a standard and singular education reminiscent of Horace Mann's vision of the "great balance-wheel of social machinery."

And yet, in time, we come across a different kind of vision and study that places the notion of educational crises in another perspective. Patricia Gándara

and Frances Contreras have drawn our attention to *The Latino Education Crisis* in the United States. Unlike other research on the status of US education, Gándara and Contreras's findings appeal not only to our sense of presumed scientific reason but also to the promise of our empathetic knowledge to undo the structural injustice of educating the poor and racially marginalized sectors of the population. Using a wide array of educational indicators such as national assessment data and school dropout and college admission rates, the authors clearly and unequivocally demonstrate that Latinos are not faring well in the US public education system. Setting forth a multipronged, evidence-based analysis of school failure, Gándara and Contreras attempt to address both the political and social origins of paltry educational outcomes. In chapters 1 through 4 the authors discuss the basics of school preparedness: the physiological realities of hunger that impact child health and mental acuity; the relationship among a family's income, mobility, and internal configuration (i.e., number of siblings, single v. parent led household); students' ability to wield social and cultural capital in navigating the school system; and the structural conditions of schools—teacher qualifications, language instruction and debates over bilingual education, school violence, tracking and so forth—that impact the categorically distinct experience of Latino students in the US.

As the authors review findings on the conditions of schools and families that attest to school failure, they are unabashedly direct: if hunger and malnutrition affect students' readiness, then schools should initiate programs to support the children's nutrition, such as vitamin supplements. If bilingual teachers are needed to adequately teach English-language learners, then the states or federal government should provide resources to recruit and train these professionals. Gándara and Contreras are policy pragmatists; if a policy can be implemented to fix a social ill, then it should be. Any move to the contrary reveals an unwillingness to address what the research unequivocally and unrelentingly tells us: poor Latino children are hungry, their families lack the social and cultural skills to actively engage the school system, their teachers need better qualifications to teach English learners, and stereotypes, tracking, and remedial educational placements reduce their college-going rates. It is not the first time these effects have been published in the academic literature, but perhaps it is the first time that such a thorough and precise analysis has been put together on Latinos in particular.

What also sets Gándara and Contreras's work apart from contemporary social research is their move at the outset to en flesh the numbers. Throughout the book, the audience is introduced to Carlos, Andres, Angela, Raquel and *otros/otras* whose life histories and school trajectories remind us that no single variable can predict school success or failure. Latino students' lives are complex and reflect the realities of living in an era when the military offers better opportunities for college admission (and citizenship rights) than an adequate high school counselor, when migration and the intergenerational memory of a homeland can either enable or constrain a family's commitment to pursuing college degrees, and when the obliga-

tion of being a man or woman in the family overrides an individual desire to leave home and community in pursuit of higher education.

Yet the authors maintain that other paths are possible. In the latter sections of the book, Gándara and Contreras present the reader with survey findings of hundreds of Latino students and interview excerpts from seemingly successful Latina/o citizens (lawyers, professors, etc.) that offer us more information about the strategies of Latina/o achievement: a caring teacher, the positive influence of peers, the awareness and ability to attend a better school in another neighborhood, college counseling and mentoring, belief in oneself, and perhaps some positive reinforcement along the way.

It is clear that Gándara and Contreras's research and analysis is intended to influence social and educational policy. It is also clear that the authors' focus on the subjective dimensions of being a Latina/o in the US can inform programmatic initiatives intended to support Latina/o students' college-going. And while research and studies on Latina/o/s and other ethnic or racial groups in the US are necessary to accentuate the particular conditions and practices that determine, to some extent, life chances and opportunities, we must also not lose sight of the importance of advancing theoretical, philosophical, and praxiological insights that emerge from the life experiences of marginalized peoples, such as Latina/o/s. This is a missing element in *The Latino Education Crisis*, and one that positions the text as devoid of a necessary understanding of the structural relations that keep our marginalized youth in relatively fixed and subordinate social and economic positions with each passing generation. In other words, the authors remain relatively unaware that the conditions that they are trying to alleviate by means of their research and policy recommendations are constitutive of schooling in capitalist society. Somehow, they think that policy recommendations will fix the system of which Latino students should become more organically a part. However, the authors might argue otherwise. For example, their discussion of hunger and the need for vitamin supplement programs for undernourished children can be considered an awareness of the structural effects of poverty. But it is a superficial understanding at best, equivalent to placing a band-aid on a bed sore, when the very formidable relations and conditions that sustain poverty are profound and rooted in the class and racial dynamics of US society. Perhaps instead of vitamin supplements, they might encourage programs that support sustainable living, where schools and communities surrounded by concrete malls and modern-day urban slums include gardens, organic decomposition, and other social and political programs that combat malnutrition. In this way, students and their families become protagonists in combating hunger and malnutrition, while developing another type of knowledge for understanding the mind-body-environment relation (instead of becoming disciplined pill poppers ready to take another rote reading exam). Here is where a recuperation of the philosophical thought of a pragmatist of different stripes, John Dewey, can encourage the practice of reflexivity for scientific reasoning, where reason as a discovery of truth is grounded in a reflection of one's surroundings and experiences. Linking the for-

mation of knowledge with the direct experience of students in the context of their environment can establish more participatory and inclusive models of educational practice and policy that seeks to overturn the authoritarian and alienated relations of schooling for our underserved students and families. In Dewey's own words, the interaction between thought and action leads to a "securer, freer and more widely shared embodiment of values in experience by means of that active control of objects which knowledge alone makes possible." (1929/1984, p. 30) Knowing about the effects of poverty is not enough; proactively acting against it opens up possibilities for transformative knowledge to emerge. And in the case of Latinos in the US, this is a necessary move if indeed we are to overcome the crisis.

This is but one example, and admittedly overly simplified. The broader point I wish to emphasize here is the need for coupling rigorous and disciplined research such as that undertaken by Gándara and Contreras that demonstrates the trends and failures of an educational system, with a critical theoretical and philosophical commitment to pursuing social justice and transcending the oppressive conditions that sustain poverty, racial and ethnic discrimination, and so forth. Unfortunately, a good proportion of work within the liberal-progressive domain of scholarly research and policy analysis does not entertain the possibility of questioning the underlying philosophy or theoretical foundations of their methods, analysis, or recommendations. Even the mention of critical theory, critical pedagogy, and philosophy tends to alarm many in the academic community.

If we adopt Stanley Fish's (2008) *ad hominem* in a recent *New York Times* blog that, "the humanities [philosophy, theory, etc.] don't do anything, if by 'do' is meant bring about effects in the world. And if they don't bring about effects in the world they cannot be justified except in relation to the pleasure they give to those who enjoy them," then we truly are in a sad state of affairs. And yet, if we follow this linear logic, then perhaps we can say the same about everything outside the humanities, with all of its technocratic and purported objective flare. We know the effects of poverty on the body and mind and yet we don't do much about it; we know the power of psychological stigma and alienation when our institutional settings blatantly discriminate against the poor and racial or ethnic Other (recall *Brown v. Board of Education*) and yet we continue to segregate our children and offer them neglected school environments. Science has done a great deal in developing instruments and computer programs that allow us to aggregate an inordinate amount of data and reach some plausible generalities (and recommendations) about social affairs. But to presume that science or social research cannot be made more equitable, and better, by some critical philosophical and theoretical (re)engagement is rather ignorant. So I say to Stanley Fish, the humanities do matter, and to Gándara and Contreras, critical questioning, philosophizing and theorizing does matter. And they matter in a way that is not just epiphenomenal, but fundamental, especially at this particular juncture in world history when we are witnessing the structural collapse (and full-throttle attempt to legislate socialism for the rich) of global capitalism.

In taking a more critical approach to their topic, the important evidence that proves the authors' case in *The Latino Education Crisis* might have acquired a necessary protagonistic dimension that could take the reader from a more critically minded "what is" to a more structurally transformative "what could be." These lacunae aside, *The Latino Education Crisis* is an important work, and its analyses and recommendations deserve to be discussed and debated not only by policy makers but by rank-and-file teachers who will be able to use this research in making the case for a more just educational system, not only for Latina/o/s, but for all students struggling to make it through the public educational system.

## **References**

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